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A FIELD INVESTIGATION INTO THE RELICT HOMINOID SITUATION IN TAJIKISTAN, U.S.S.R.

DMITRI BAYANOV
Darwin Museum, Moscow, 119 435, U.S.S.R.

INTRODUCTION

From August 27 to September 22, 1982, the author visited three regions of Tajikistan for the purpose of learning first-hand the hominological situation there. (Hominology in the Soviet Union is the investigation of supposed unknown, human-like animals known as relict hominoids.) Tajikistan is a constituent Soviet republic in Soviet Central Asia, lying at the latitudes of northern California. Although it is a relatively small Soviet republic, comprising only 0.6 percent of all Soviet territory (Fig. 1), it is 55,237 square miles, about the size of Wisconsin, or Nepal, and somewhat bigger than Greece. Ninety-three percent of the republic's area consists of mountains, some of which are the highest in the U.S.S.R.

The beginnings of hominoid research in Tajikistan is connected with the name of Professor Boris Porshnev, who took part in a 1958 U.S.S.R. Academy of Sciences "Snowman" expedition, and who later visited the area several times. The Scientific Commission to Study the Snowman Question that existed at the time received accounts from General M. S. Topilsky, who claimed to have examined a slain hairy wildman in Tajikistan in 1925, from prospector B. M. Zdorik, who claimed to have stumbled on a sleeping hairy "dev" in 1934, from hydrologist A. G. Pronin, claiming a hominoid sighting in 1957, and some others.

When the lack of physical evidence resulted in the evaporating of official interest in the problem, Tajikistan (being several thousand kilometers from Moscow) took second place after the Caucasus in our self-funded hominology research. But in the late 1970's, factory worker and mountaineer Igor Tatsl, of Kiev, later supported by Igor Bourtsev, of Moscow, put much effort into bringing Tajikistan back to the fore of hominological activity. In 1980, two hominoid sightings were claimed by Tatsl expedition members, the first ever reported by actual field searchers. These developments, given publicity in the U.S.S.R. and abroad, met with enthusiastic acclaim from a segment of the public, and with silence or negative reaction from the scientific community. The Darwin Museum and newspaper editors received many pro and con letters from all over the U.S.S.R., including Tajikistan. Hence my decision to undertake a fact-finding trip to the area in 1982.

NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION

Upon arriving in Dushanbe, capital of Tajikistan, my colleague Vadim Makarov and I consulted local hominoid researchers, including geophysicist

FIG. 1.—Location of the Soviet Republic of Tajikistan, where the author conducted several weeks of fieldwork.

Karl Yefremov, who advised us to visit the region of Sary-Khosor, some 100 kilometers southeast of Dushanbe, where he had heard sighting accounts from the local population.

In the company of four associates from Dushanbe, Makarov and I trekked through the mountains for a week in the region of Sary-Khosor. Traveling along creek-beds and hardly discernible or very precipitous paths for several days, we encountered no human habitation. The fauna was most conspicuous by numerous and ever present bear tracks of different sizes, left mainly in creek-beds; I found this encouraging, as the bear and the supposed hominoid are about equal in weight and diet. The bear feces we found were full of stones from wild plums (*Prunus divaricata*) and undigested plums. Occasionally, we came across plum-trees with branches broken and bent down, and a lot of fruit strewn on the ground—leftovers of bear feasts. Bears (*Ursus arctos isabellinus*) are abundant in Tajikistan for two reasons: food is plentiful, and the Tajiks, being Moslems, do not eat bear meat. They trap bears only rarely, we were told, with nooses hidden in those plum-trees, to obtain bear fat, which is used for medicinal purposes.

In one place, toward the end of our mountain trek, we came upon a mud hut used by wild fruit and walnut pickers, a kind of seasonal dug-out in a gully slope. The hut was open, with no owner present. We could see pro-

visions inside the hut, and ubiquitous bear tracks not far outside. We then descended into the Shirop-dara valley, and met the first inhabitants. It was the summer camp of the wild fruit pickers whose "front-line" dug-out we had seen in the mountains. With traditional Tajik hospitality, they treated us to milk, honey, pancakes and tea. Conversation was difficult because the family spoke only poor Russian, and we had only a few Tajik words—mostly names of animals—at our command. Still, we understood that the grandmother of the family, who was present, had seen a *gul* (pronounced "gool," a common Tajik name for the supposed wildman), right in front of the hut in the mountains already known to us, when she was young. Details could not be obtained because of the language handicap. They said they knew of no recent sightings.

A Forest Service worker we interviewed later said he had seen the tracks of a *gul* when he was a boy. We had noticed the reluctance of most locals to discuss the subject, with the exception of educated Tajiks at the main Forest Service office in the village of Sary-Khosor. The director of the office, Saidov, and the village council chairman, Makhmat Buriev, said that from time to time they got information about wildman from hunters, shepherds, and Forest Service workers. In 1980, for example, they were surprised to see a flock of sheep driven from the mountain pastures to the village in mid-August (usually this is done in late September). An agitated shepherd told them that he had seen a big black *gul* near the pasture; his dogs had taken fright, and he did not have the courage to stay there any longer.

I asked whether *guls* are reported to steal sheep, and got a negative answer. However, shepherds sometimes report finding pelts of mice and gophers separated very nicely from the carcasses, and they believe the *gul* is responsible. Forked sticks are sometimes found near rodents' holes; these are supposed to be used by *guls* to catch mice.

The next leg of our journey took us to the Karatag gorge, in the Gissar Range, northwest of Dushanbe, the site of a purported sighting by two Tatsl expedition members at Lake Pairon in 1980. On the way to the lake, we met and talked with Gafar Jabirov, a local Forest Service patrolman, who claimed to have seen a wildman, and even fired at him, several years before, as was reported in the press by Igor Bourtsev. I found Jabirov to be a serious and respectable person, who had no doubt that he had seen a *gul* in the Karatag gorge, and I had no doubts concerning his sincerity.

We reached Lake Pairon, and inspected the site of expedition members Geliona Siforova's and Dima Sizov's purported sighting in September, 1980. Makarov and I were joined there by Igor Bourtsev and Geliona Siforova herself, who showed us the exact place and explained the details of the encounter. She and Sizov claim to have seen a female hominoid, 10 yards from where they were spending the night on the ground, under a tree on the shore of the mountain lake. The creature sat on a boulder watching them

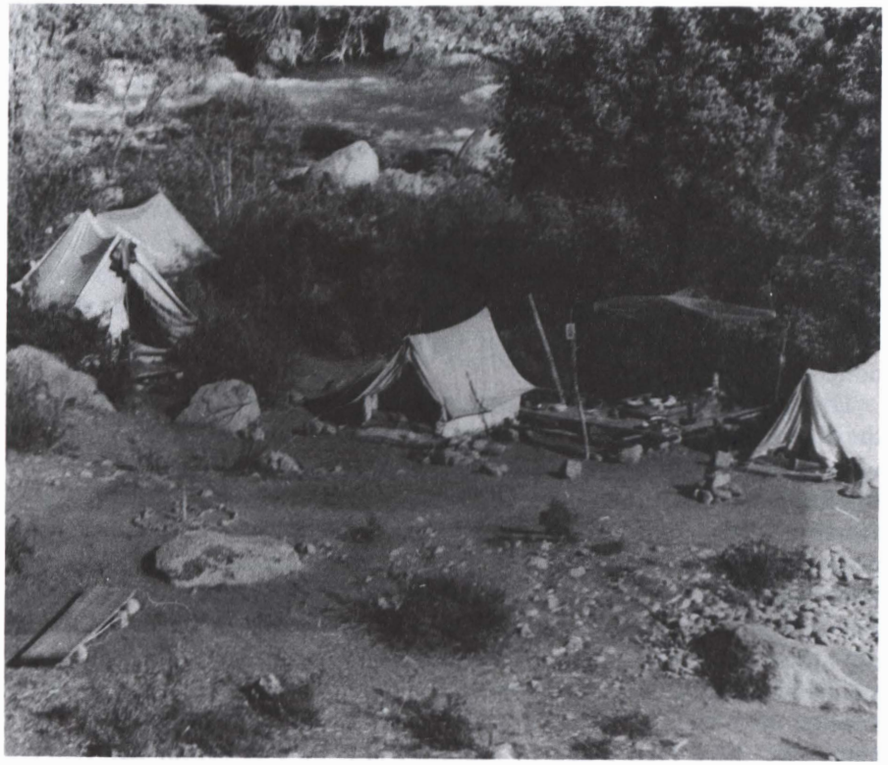

FIG. 2.—Igor Tatsl's base camp by the Siama River, about 50 kilometers north of Dushanbe, capital of the Soviet Republic of Tajikistan. The base camp, in the Gissar Range, is located on the "crossroads" of two canyons, and is partially hidden by vegetation.

and making munching sounds for a long period of time. No footprints or hairs could be found in the morning where the creature had sat through its night vigil.

We spent several nights at the same spot, but no *guls* joined our company. On one night, I went and sat on the boulder, making various movements, while Bourtsev, lying 10 yards away, was telling (correctly) how I moved. We concluded that Siforova and Sizov could have at least made out the creature at that distance at night.

On the way back from the Karatag, I talked with a Forest Service man named Aslon Zakirov, at his office in Shakhrinau. He said he was much intrigued by the subject of wildman, and had interviewed his fellow-Tajiks on the matter whenever he had a chance. He told me of an encounter 5 years earlier of a Tajik hunter, whom he fully trusted, with "a giant hairy man, very broad in the shoulders, with the face like that of an ape." Zakirov

said that, though such encounters are very rare, Forest Service rules prohibit their employees from spending the night alone in the mountains for fear of these wildmen.

I then discussed the subject with an experienced local journalist in Dushanbe. For him, the existence of wildmen in Tajikistan was a matter of fact, but he doubted the problem could ever be solved without forceful official involvement. He wondered where and how the creatures spend their winters. The snow is two meters deep in the Gissar mountains in the winter. He said he had observed the area during helicopter flights, and could even spot mice tracks, but never those of a wildman. In his opinion, the hominoids migrate for the winter to the very south of Tajikistan, where there is little snow or none at all.

The third and last region I visited was on the Siama River, a tributary of the Varzob River, some 50 kilometers north of Dushanbe. This is the site of Igor Tatsl's activities in the last several years, where hominoid tracks and sightings have been claimed. I found the area good from a topological perspecitive; Tatsl's base camp stands on a "crossroads" of canyons, and is partially hidden by vegetation (Fig. 2), so that hominoids can supposedly safely approach the camp in their wanderings from one canyon to another. But how much of this really happens, and how much is just imagined by expedition members is impossible to tell at present. Nina Grinyova, who claimed a sighting in August, 1980, was present during my visit, and she re-enacted the scene for us. All I can conclude is that I found her story more believable there than I had in Moscow. Attempts to repeat her claimed achievement with similar tactics (staying alone at night) have proved fruitless so far. Food-baits and photo-traps have not worked, either.

Results

Tajikistan appears to be an ecologically fitting habitat for relict hominoids. The abundant signs I witnessed of local fauna, particularly omnivores such as bears and wild pigs, indicate enough food resources for the presumably omnivorous hominoids the year round. Anthropogenic pressure on them is also no problem. The 93 percent of the republic's territory taken up by mountains is virtually devoid of permanent human population, so the latter poses no special danger to wild hominoids.

The long and continuing record of purported hominoid sightings in the area, supported by the new accounts discussed above, leads me to the conclusion that such creatures do exist there. But to turn this conclusion into a scientific fact is as difficult in Tajikistan as anywhere. Overoptimistic forecasts that appeared in the Soviet press in connection with Igor Tatsl's expeditions were based on wishful thinking, while some foreign reports exaggerated and distorted the situation out of all proportion.

As a result of this expedition, I am more inclined than ever to think that relict hominoids have neither "supernatural" nor simply "animal" status, but what I call "superanimal" status. And this is for quite natural reasons: their large brains, coupled with upright walking and free hands. These factors are responsible, perhaps, for their occasional strange behavior, on the one hand, and their "abnormal" elusiveness, on the other. The latter is largely achieved through what could be called a "guerrilla tactic of supermobility." In the words of a local hunter, the wildman "is as nimble-footed as a wild ram, as sharp-eyed as an eagle, and as good at hearing as a snow leopard. There is no one in the mountains to challenge him."

Future Plans

Tajikistan remains high on the agenda of our fieldwork. We aim to reduce the quantity and raise the quality of expedition members. One of our main concerns is to re-engage the scientific community in this investigation, and to raise funds for year-round fieldwork, instead of the two–three-month stints presently conducted at our own expense.